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A RECOLLECTION OF DENNIS PENNINGTON.

BY JOHN W. RAY.

DENNIS PENNINGTON, a man almost wholly forgotten at the present day, and about whom little or no information can be gleaned in our published histories and biographies, was one of the remarkable men of our State in its formative period. So far as long-continued public service goes, perhaps no man at any period has been more intimately identified with the making of the State. No other man, I believe, in the whole history of the commonwealth, has so frequently represented his constituents in the councils of the State. In this respect his career was certainly notable. As early as 1810 his name appears as speaker in the territorial legislature. He was a delegate from Harrison county to the constitutional convention of 1816, and as such he had an influence in the very beginnings of our legal framework. With the convening of our first legislature he took his seat in the Senate, and during sessions 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 27, 28, 29 he was a member of that body. During sessions 7, 8, 13, 14, and 30 he was in the House. This makes thirteen years as a Senator and five as a Representative, or eighteen all told, as a legislator during the thirty years of his political activity. From sessions 1 to 4, 7 to 11, 15 to 17 and 27 to 30 (inclusive) his services were unbroken—a fact, surely, which must argue a phenomenal popularity and standing with his constituents.

It should be noted that Dennis Pennington represented a type of man that was held in esteem by our pioneer fathers, and a type that cut something of a figure among our early public men. He was uneducated, so far as the schools went, but educated by his contact with life and men. Above all, he possessed the virtues of honesty and a robust common sense—what the rank and file appreciate and designate as “horse sense”—and, something which, if coupled with honesty of purpose, rarely fails to go right and counts for more than mere learning. He was, moreover, outside of his public usefulness, a man of practical, mechanical ability, and the old State House at Corydon, as

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well as the famous old inn a mile out of town, built by him, still stand as monuments to his skill. Like the body of those who shaped the beginnings of the State, he was a Christian, being a member, I believe (though of this I am not sure) of the Baptist church.

My personal recollection of Dennis Pennington dates back to the middle thirties. Ever since the seat of government was removed to Indianapolis, in 1825, he had been a boarder at the house of my grandmother, Elizabeth Nowland, one of the best-known public houses in the town, and his place in our family had come to be much like that of a relative—indeed, he was familiarly known to all the family as “Uncle Dennis.” My father and mother moved to Jeffersonville in 1836, and Uncle Dennis was a frequent visitor at our home there. I remember him as a genial, kindly old man, beloved by everybody, and the kind of one to win the heart of a boy. He was somewhat large and heavy, with a big, smooth, smiling face, a cordial, hearty hand-grasp, and of a jocular nature. I recall that when he came he used always to greet my mother with upraised forefinger shaken in playful reproof, and with the words: “Sallie, Sallie, you bad girl, to make me drunk!” This was reminiscent of earlier days, and thereby hung a story. When mother was a young woman and Uncle Dennis a boarder with my grandmother in Indianapolis, he came in one day and found the daughter of the house taking a nap on the lounge in the sitting-room. Securing a corn dodger, some ham, and generous et ceteras on a platter, he left them on a chair beside the sleeper. My mother accepted the little joke as a challenge, and with a vim characteristic of her, planned retaliation. Uncle Dennis was inordinately fond of mince pie, and, while a strong temperance advocate, was not averse to a tang of brandy in his favorite dessert. The day after the dodger and ham offering a great fat pie of extra tempting quality sat smoking hot beside the Pennington plate, intended for his sole consumption. He consumed it, leaving not a crumb behind. When the legislature met at 2 p. m., Pennington of Harrison was not in his seat. At 3 the town was alarmed by the rumor that Uncle Dennis had been poisoned. The legislature adjourned in a panic and came down to the Nowland house to learn about it; the citizens gathered about the place in

awe, and Drs. Dunlap and Sanders came to investigate, but only to be puzzled. Then Sallie, the joker, confessed: Uncle Dennis had merely taken a good stiff glass of cognac brandy along with his mince pie.

I think of Dennis Pennington as a grand old man, who did long and honest and valuable service to the young commonwealth. That he and what he did have passed so completely away from the knowledge of men is regrettable, and as one of the few survivors who remember him I take pleasure in recalling him, even briefly, to the present generation.

[NOTE.—The above recollections were submitted to us shortly before Mr. Ray's death, a few months since.—*Editor.*]

A DENNIS PENNINGTON LETTER.

In connection with the foregoing article this letter from Dennis Pennington to Colonel John Paul, of Madison, will contribute somewhat to our scant information about the man. For one thing, Mr. Ray's reference to his lack of schooling is here illustrated. There are two points of particular interest in this letter. One is the evidence that in 1815 there was a fight for the removal of the capital from Corydon to Salem, and that Madison also seems to have harbored an aspiration in this direction—facts that have been lost to history. The other is that there was also an agitation for the removal of the Jefferson county seat of justice from Madison to some more central point. In the somewhat fragmentary historical material relating to Jefferson county there is, we believe, no reference to this movement. The letter, now in our possession, was found in Jefferson county not long since.—*Editor.*]

Corydon November 3rd 1815

Dear Sir.

I have thought it not criminal to Drope you a few lines by mail on publical affairs as I have had it in contemplation for some time and still neglected it from time to time and at last have made the venter. I discovered some time ago in the Western Eagle that the party Sperit in your County to a vary high Degree respecting the removeal of the sete of Justice of your County to the center of the same as though it had never been fixed by the unamous request of the citizens of the County at Its first Erection in to a County. It is astonishing to see what party sperit will Do; thay have forgotten the Dammage those must